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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 001190

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/26/2013

TAGS: [ETRD](#) [KCRM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SNAR](#) [IR](#) [YE](#)

SUBJECT: IRAN'S PRESIDENT KHATAMI VISITS YEMEN: NO
NOTICEABLE EXCITEMENT

REF: SANAA 1188

Classified By: DCM ALAN MISENHEIMER FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (E)

SUMMARY

1. C) Iranian President Mohammed Khatami's May 15/18 visit to Yemen was low-key, almost pro forma, with little public exposure and no overtures to Yemen's large Shi'a community. Although six cooperative agreements were signed, in areas from security to shipping, the accords broke little new ground. The joint statement released on his departure was anodyne, calling for "foreign troops to end their occupation of Iraq." Relations have improved in recent years and Khatami showed a friendly face. But the visit does not seem to signal great advances in mutual confidence. End Summary

LOW-KEY FORMALITY

2. (C) Iran's President Mohammed Khatami, returning ROYG President Salih's 2002 visit to Tehran, was welcomed with all presidential courtesies in Sanaa on May 15. His schedule was formal, with few public events. All proper protocol was observed, including joint arrival statements with television coverage. The two presidents were photographed beaming cordially across the interpreter; in a rare departure from his usual formal habits, President Salih wore Yemeni native dress, with the traditional jambiah dagger in his belt.

PHOTO OPS

3. (C) Khatami's official meetings were appropriately scheduled with the highest ranking local notables, including Speaker of Parliament, Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, Shura Council head, Abdul Aziz Abdul Ghani, and Prime Minister Abdul Qadir Ba Jammal. Katemi also had an unusual private meeting with Ahmad Ali Abdullah Saleh, the president's 33 year old son who commands the Republican Guard, but no substantive military contacts. The opening greetings at all these meetings were duly photographed for television and newspapers, but the conversations were merely summarized as "friendly exchanges of views."

WHAT DIDN'T HAPPEN

4. (C) Khatami did not address any public gatherings during his visit, such as university students or parliamentary groups, did not meet with any local Shi'a clerics, and gave no interviews to the local media. He visited Sanaa's famous Grand Mosque (which dates from the seventh century founding of Islam) but as a tourist rather than a worshiper. Local television covered President Salih attendance at Friday prayers at the same mosque, escorted by his usual retainers but without his Iranian visitors.

THE AGREEMENTS

5. (C) The two sides signed agreements in six areas, including security, trade, development and economic cooperation, banking, education and culture and shipping. According to one Yemeni contact in the Ministry of Development and International Cooperation, the two agreements signed in his office were "fill in the blanks" documents with few specific references to Yemeni conditions. Press accounts of the security accord refer to increased cooperation on fighting drug trafficking and organized crime. (Other details about security cooperation are reported reftel.)

6. (C) The more specific agreements focused on trade, education, and shipping. Bilateral trade has grown tenfold since 1990 and Iranian goods are increasingly found in local markets, including machine tools, pharmaceuticals, and small buses. (These products often beat European, Asian and American products on price, FOB Aden, and are considered good quality by local merchants.) Iranian companies have completed

several projects here, including the Socotra airport strip, improvements to Hodeidah's oil port anchorage, and road paving works. In education, Iran offered a number of scholarships and exchange programs as well as a schedule for increased "cultural functions." The shipping agreement reflects Yemen's need to increase traffic through the port of Aden; more Iranian cargo and tanker ships would be most welcome, whether to transship goods, or merely for bunkering stops.

THE JOINT STATEMENT

17. (C) The anodyne joint statement signed by Salih and Khatami may also have been a cut and paste exercise: there is little to distinguish Yemen's document from other stops on Khatami's Arab Tour 2003. Predictably, both leaders praised brotherly relations, called for immediate withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraq, stressed the pivotal role of the UN and renewed their dedication to the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, including Jerusalem as their capital. They did strongly denounce and condemn terrorism, but drew a distinction between it and "legitimate national resistance" movements.

COMMENT

8.(C) Khatami's recent tour focused on Arab countries with large Shi'a communities embedded among Sunnis. But, in Yemen at least, pastoral or leadership pretensions were not apparent. He seemed to go out of his way to be non-threatening to his Yemeni hosts, who had viewed past Iranian leaders with deep suspicion. The visit had some practical benefits: ROYG President Salih enjoys the prestige of international visitors, growing commercial ties make economic sense, and poor Yemeni students, especially those majoring in religious and legal training, will gratefully accept scholarships to Iran. However, as one MFA contact commented, the visit did little to strengthen ties between Yemen and Iran, because no one expects Khatami to hold power much longer "between you Americans and the Mullahs."

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